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Arnold, Roxane

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Veteran Detective Leads Search for 'Valley Intruder'

Homicide Cop Is Perfect Man for the Job

By ROXANE ARNOLD,
Times Staff Writer

Sheriff's Sgt. Frank Salerno, the lead detective in the so-called "Valley Intruder" case, is everybody's idea of a good homicide cop.

"You don't want this guy following you," said one former sheriff's investigator. "Sooner or later, he's successful."

"He's as good as you can get," added Detective Sgt. Bill Williams of the Los Angeles Police Department.

The 46-year-old Salerno, who joined the Sheriff's Department in 1961, has "worked homicide" for almost 10 years. He has tracked down the flimsiest of clues in cases almost nobody remembers and, a few years back, played a key role in an investigation few can forget—the notorious Hillside Strangler case, the sex slayings of 10 young women and girls in 1977 and 1978.

Salerno's latest quarry is described as a curly haired man with stained, widely gapped teeth who slips through unlocked doors and windows before dawn to attack his



KEN LUBAS / Los Angeles Times

Sgt. Frank Salerno

victims as they sleep. At least six killings and 15 rapes, beatings and kidnapings in the San Gabriel and San Fernando valleys are being linked to the killer.

The many months spent in the late 1970s working on the Hillside Strangler case "is going to be a great advantage in working a case

like this," Salerno said. "We've got other investigators who have also worked the Hillside case."

A key lesson has to do with the behavior of serial killers.

"Blanchi (Kenneth Bianchi, one of the two killers in the Hillside case) proved one thing, and that is: most serial murderers don't stop. They might relocate. They will kill again.

"I would expect he (the Valley Intruder) would again."

About 50 investigators from six local police agencies have been drawn into the task force established last week to track down the killer. The challenge of the task force will be to coordinate and keep track of the each of the thousands of slivers of information that could

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mean something important.

Already, investigators have received more than 1,000 leads and tips to check, ranging from the caller who sighted a stranger resembling a composite sketch of the killer to the tipster who named a friend as a possible suspect.

A major flaw in the massive Hillside Strangler probe was that too often such information was not shared and that some investigators were not fully informed, those close to the case said.

At the height of that exhaustive investigation, a task force that swelled to 162 officers from the Los Angeles and Glendale police departments and the Sheriff's Department was established to track down the more than 10,000 clues that surfaced. Although the information gathered was fed into a computer, the data was not cross-indexed and obvious connections, at least in the case of Bianchi, were missed.

Bianchi, for example, was interviewed by investigators on separate occasions, but each time the questioning officers were unaware that Bianchi had crossed their path before.

"There were so many 'clue clowns,' I think they called them," complained Katherine Mader, a defense attorney for Angelo Buono, the second Hillside Strangler killer. "Bianchi was interviewed three times by different law enforcement officers and gave statements that were never followed up on. . . . They (the task force) would parcel out clues, but they wouldn't have enough coordination."

In the current investigation, all

information is being cross-indexed, Salerno said.

"You learn as you go along," he said of the Strangler investigation. "I think naturally because of the amount of information that came in on that case, mistakes are going to be made. . . . You learn from your mistakes."

"No doubt about it," Salerno added. "One of the major (improvements) is cross-indexing. We're trying to accomplish more correlation and exchange of information between the various agencies that are working. It's almost a daily contact between the investigators, and also meetings and briefings."

The fact that so many police agencies are involved poses problems that go beyond exchanging

massive amounts of information.

"You have different methods of reporting, of handling evidence, of interviewing," Salerno said. "You have to try and overcome that. . . . to make sure nothing falls through."

But even with streamlined techniques, he said, the Intruder case may not be easily solved. He said the investigation may prove even more complex than other serial killings, including the Hillside Strangler case. The motivations of this killer are harder to pin down.

"Whenever you work a case, either a serial case or one that takes a lengthy period of time, the investigator develops in his own mind the type of individual he is looking for," Salerno said.

"This is a much more complex

individual as far as trying to get a handle on what kind of psychological profile he has. . . . The diversity makes it tough and then when you throw in random victims, which are the most difficult of cases to solve, you've really got your hands full."

Already, Salerno, his partner, Gil Carrillo, and the other 20 to 25 sheriff's investigators assigned to the case are working marathon shifts, sifting through myriad pieces of information.

Salerno is coming close to duplicating the seven-day weeks he worked for months during the Strangler investigation, but he says he is just one of many working those same grueling hours.

Investigators, he said, "are running out of shoe leather. . . . It's just good old-fashioned police work where people are going out knocking on doors and talking to people. "It's the type of work that isn't shown on television. . . . It takes longer than 60 minutes plus commercials."

Exhausting hours or not, Salerno really loves the work and the challenge.

A solid six-footer, he looks and acts the part of a veteran detective. He is slow-talking, deliberate and cool-headed.

A family man, Salerno abandoned college for police work "way back in medieval (times)." It's a decision he says he has never regretted.

"What appealed to me is it would be an exciting job," he said. "You weren't tied to any one spot and you dealt with people. . . . I want to stay right here. I want this case solved. . . . soon."